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WRITING SYSTEMS AND GUIDES TO PRONUNCIATION: ROMANIZATION

Considerations for and against the revision of a romanization system - the case of Hebrew

Paper submitted by Israel**

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In a paper presented to the 18th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names by Israel [1], a number of considerations concerning a possible revision in the romanization rules for Hebrew were examined. The presentation drew some quite interesting (if not quite unanticipated) reactions from a number of attending Experts, which were followed up by a correspondence on the matter. The present paper is designed to highlight the main points of the problem.

While the case under review is a particular one concerning Israel, it may perhaps serve as a test case for others, especially for countries which still have to devise a romanization system.

The matter of changes in an accepted and established transliteration system cannot be approached lightly, a point which is undoubtedly clear to both proposers and opposers. And while any country is free to adopt its own particular system according to the donor principle, the toponymic authorities in Israel are attentive to any constructive criticism.

The following reflections can be classified under a number of headings. But here, first, is a brief historical review.

The present romanization system for Hebrew was devised in 1956 by the Academy of the Hebrew Language, the national body regulating the use of this language. It was adopted by the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) and published in the Government Gazette in January 1957. It was then immediately adopted by the *Survey of Israel*, national surveying and mapping authority. In 1977 the undersigned, as delegate of Israel, presented it to the Third UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in Athens, and it was adopted as Resolution No. 13; see [2].

For the 40 years since its introduction this system has been applied by the *Survey of Israel* in its official maps. Very few map publishers in Israel or other bodies dealing with geographical names employed it in their products, for reasons explained below. The PWD (Public Works Department) used the official romanization system in its road signs, but consistently omitted the two main diacritic signs, using *h* for underscored *ḥ* and *z* for underscored *ẓ* (see below for a definition of the differences).

In the course of these years many complaints have been lodged agains this system, and these form the background to the present deliberations by the *Commission on Geographical Names Orthography*. The main member-institutions on this body are the *Survey of Israel*, the Public Works Department, the Government Tourism Corporation, the Nature Reserves Authority, the National Parks Authority and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

General Treatment

It should be clear to anybody dealing with the matter of conversion of geographical names, and with transliteration in general and romanization as a particular case, that there exists no ideal solution to the problem of transferring the sounds and their graphic representation from one language to another

– transcription – and from one writing system to another – transliteration (for definitions of the technical terms in this paper see *Glossary of Toponymic Terminology*, [3]). In the best case an optimal answer can be found. In the following we shall restrict ourselves to the case of transliteration from a non-Roman script to a Roman one, i.e. to romanization.

The very first question that any institution wishing to generate a formal and consistent system of names conversion must ask itself is the following: what is the purpose of the project? In other words: whom should the system serve, i.e. what is the expected "user population"? The next question will be: should the system convey to the user (the "receiver" or "target") the orthography of the source script, or its sounds and phonology? It is clear that both objectives cannot be combined in a single system.

The third question concerns reversibility: should the transliteration be reversible (rigorously or less so), i.e. is it required that from the transliterated form in the target script the reader can infer the original form in the source script?

It appears to the present writer that in few cases of transliteration systems – including those approved and adopted by the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names and the Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names – the originators of the systems have indeed asked themselves these pertinent questions. And this is what the Israeli *Commission* has lately been doing. Existing transliteration systems give rise to the impression that they are more producer-oriented than – as they should be – user-oriented. In other words, the creators of these systems may have been qualified linguists, but they probably were not sufficiently in touch with the "real world" which they are supposed to serve. The romanization of Arabic can serve as an example of taking this matter into account: mainly because of the different ways of transliterating e.g. the letter ش (shīn) by the francophone and the anglophone populations, no single unified romanization system for Arabic has as yet been adopted by the relevant UN bodies [4]. Although the Group of Experts and the Conference recommended that "States should refrain from revising systems previously adopted for international use" [5], in some cases proposals for amendments in existing systems were brought before, and some of them indeed approved by, the UN bodies. Examples are Amharic [6], Arabic [7] and Devanagari [8].

Although the Hebrew system has been in use for 40 years, it is not a "holy cow" immune from criticism or revision. If really found necessary it should be amended. On the other hand, the popular expression "the best is the enemy of the good" must also be kept in mind.

Concerning the objections to change in a well-established and, in the words of some critics, a scientific system, these were heard in United Nations meetings in the past especially when China introduced its Pinyin system replacing Wade-Giles [9] and when the former USSR did the same with GOST 1983. The chief objectors were the United States and the United Kingdom for, among others, the very valid reason that these were, and are, the leading world atlas producers. Conversion from the old systems to the new required huge financial inputs for tens of thousands of changes in spelling. In the case of Hebrew the number of name changes would be only a fraction of those required for Chinese or Russian. Another reason offered was that the new systems of romanization, designed by the donor countries, were even less user-friendly than the old ones which were designed by "representatives" of the largest slice of the user population of the romanized targets. Conversely, the proposed changes in the romanization of Hebrew tend to make it more easily used by speakers of English – a feature stressed as desirable by the United Kingdom [10] which now objects to the change.

Attempting now to supply answers to the above questions in the specific case of Israel and Hebrew, we shall start with question No. 1. What is the user population of the romanization of Hebrew? On the one hand there are the producers of romanized maps (a) in Israel and (b) in other countries. However, these should not reside in "ivory towers" but cater to the needs of their readership. Some of these readers /...

may be interested, or even active, in some branch of science such as history, geography archaeology or toponymy. But they, like Antoine de St. Exupéry's geographer in *The Little Prince*, work mainly at their desks [11]. I shall come back to these when dealing with reversibility. But by far the largest proportion of the users of romanized Hebrew are the millions of tourists who visit Israel each year. These, or at least a very considerable part of them, use maps in order to find their way about the country. In order to be able to do this they have to ask about place names – and asking involves orally communicating with local residents (most of whom can speak English).

The answer to the first question is, therefore: romanized maps, at least those produced locally, must, in the first place, satisfy the needs of actual visitors to the country, chiefly tourists.

Question No. 2: orthography-oriented or phonetically-based? The answer to this question follows from the previous one. Romanized maps of the country should enable the foreign visitor to ask local residents about places they wish to visit or learn about. In order to make themselves intelligible to Israelis, they must be enabled to pronounce the respective names in a more or less "correct" way by reading them in the map. The spelling should, therefore, be as user-friendly as possible from the viewpoint of the foreigner, which means that it should convey to the reader the proper sounds with a minimum of "intellectual effort" on his part. This, again, means that the system should have a minimum of diacritic signs and deviations from letter values known to him or her. Where possible, Roman letters should be used for the sounds which they represent in the target language . In the case of the majority of tourists visiting Israel this is English. Adherence to the original spelling takes second place. This is accentuated by the fact that many names, if not most, are found in literature and non-official maps in unofficial and, to the reader, more intelligible forms.

Question No. 3: should there be reversibility, and if so how much of it? Again, the answer here stems from that to question No. 2. Reversibility is the possibility to deduce the original (here – Hebrew) spelling from the romanized form. But this means that the reader looking for reversibility in the system has at least some knowledge of the writing of the source language (Hebrew). This can be expected only of a small minority of users. And this minority – among them chiefly archaeologists, historians and linguists – will be using (or at least are able to use) unromanized maps in the original script if necessary. Reversibility is thus relegated to a lower status than user-friendliness in reproducing the sounds of the source language. The principle of reversibility which even in the "old" UN-sanctioned official system was achieved only partially should be adhered to only as long as it does not interfere with the facility of sound representation.

Question No. 4: this concerns the use of exonyms. In Israel, a further problem is involved, so the additional question will be: should certain exonyms be approved for "internal" use? In other words, should there be a list of donor-recommended exonyms? As country of the Bible, Israel has both retained and revived many place names found already in the Old and New Testaments. Some of these are well known throughout the Christian world, such as Jerusalem, Nazareth, Cana, Capernaum, Mount Carmel, Mount Tabor and others. These are used in Hebrew in their original form (romanized respectively as Yerushalayim, Nazerat, Kana, Kefar-Nahum, Har Karmel, Har Tavor), but they are recognized also as English exonyms in maps and road signs. See [12].

Particular Treatment

Having dealt with the subject in a more or less general way, the specific problematic letters and diacritics of the present romanization of Hebrew will be itemized. The details of the existing Hebrew romanization will not be repeated; they can be found in [2] and [13]; only certain specific problematic letters and diacritics will be mentioned below.

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When the Academy of the Hebrew Language decided on its romanization system, it tried to follow a "traditional" Hebrew pronunciation used chiefly by Eastern ("Sefardi") Israelis. This resulted in the two following consonant transliterations which (among others) are now under critical review.

Perhaps the main stumbling block was considered to be the letter ק, the guttural *k*, equivalent to the later Arabic ق. Following established British practice, this letter was romanized by the letter *q*. However, Western persons (including the numerous tourists visiting Israel, using official maps and following roadsigns) are not used to seeing the letter *q* unless followed by *u*. Thus, they do not recognize *q* as representing an allophone of the /k/ phoneme and pronounce e.g. Qirya as Quirya, Ashqelon as Ashquelon or Qorant as Quoranit. Besides, they usually cannot pronounce it correctly – and even most Israelis do not make the distinction between the two /k/ allophones, כ (transliterated by *k*) and the guttural ק (transliterated by *q*). Moreover, in Chinese Pinyin the *q* represents IPA /t ʃ/, the *ch* sound, so its phonemic use is not universal.

Transliterating consonantic ו by *w* has also been criticised. Practically only the minority of Israeli linguistic purists of Yemenite descent pronounce this as *w*, everybody else – as English *v*.

Another problematic romanization concerns the letter צ representing the /ts/ phoneme. This, in the old system, was transliterated by underscored z . Most speakers of English (and these constitute the majority of tourists in Israel) do not distinguish between this and plain z. The opposite is true of speakers of German, who correctly read this for /ts/, but who do not associate z with the voiced /z/. The substitution of *tz* has been suggested. but since /ts/ ends in the unvoiced fricative /s/, *ts* is at present being considered.

Diacritical signs which are used to distinguish between different phonemes expressed by a single grapheme (such as *z* and *ẓ* for /z/ and /ts/, respectively) have two main disadvantages. They are not self-explanatory so that they must be defined in a transliteration table (the same is, of course, true of the unconventional use of letters such as *q* for Chinese ch). And in not a few cases they are difficult to produce on typesetting equipment and word processors, or else, being small, they tend to be lost in the reproduction process, particularly in map printing. In all these cases they lose their meaning. Therefore, one of the aims of a good transliterating system should be to minimize the use of diacritics while still being self-explanatory to a majority of readers.

Romanization of Hebrew employed two such diacritics, namely *ẓ* for /ts/ as stated above, and *ḫ* for the guttural allophone of /χ/, roughly the *ch* sound in Scottish *loch* or German *ach*, to distinguish it from plain *h*. No proper substitute for *ḫ* has, as yet, been devised. But a person pronouncing it simply as *h* is not so far off the mark.

The mute stops א and (guttural) ע (to which correspond Arabic ا and ع) may now both be represented by ' instead of by ' and ‘ respectively in the past, because the Western reader does not distinguish between them. And it should only be inserted in positions where it actually and vocally divides between vowels. Incidently, and strictly speaking, the ' sign is not a diacritic, since it does not *modify* a letter; it is a grapheme which *represents* a letter.

Digraphs, too, are somewhat problematical – as are the diacritical marks which can, and in certain cases do, substitute for them. While *sh* for Hebrew ש, representing the / ʃ / sound, is at least "natural" for speakers of English, *kh* for the Hebrew undotted כ (the IPA /χ/ sound) is not – in any language. The digraph *ch* is being considered; this is understandable to speakers of German and used also in English Bibles (Taanach, Malachi, Machtesh, Michmas, Abimelech and many more). But because of confusion of *ch* by English speakers with the /t ʃ / sound, even in medial and final positions (unpointd כ cannot occur initially), the English convention of *kh* was adopted in the past, both in Hebrew and in Arabic (for خ). Since "Sassenachs" (Saxons, or simply southern Englishmen to Scots) cannot usually

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properly pronounce the *ch* in Scottish *loch* and say *lock*, the *kh* convention invented by English linguists is understandable.

A further problem is the doubling of consonants carrying a *dagesh ḥazaq* (similar to Arabic *shaddah*). This is critical in the case of the digraph *sh* and would look incongruous in transliterating e.g. the toponym *Mashshash*. Since the doubling is anyway not very marked in speech, it might in the future be abolished in the transliteration of other consonants too.

Stability of the System

Finally, the important aspect of stability of the existing system must be considered. This is indeed an issue of importance, and speaks against any change in a well-established system. The changes are expressed not only in financial terms but in temporal ones, too: a number of years will be required until the new system will be "absorbed", not so much by map users for whom the new system will be easier to use than the old but by map producers. However, when one weighs the advantages to the users as agains the disadvantages to the producer (and the greatest burden will fall upon those in Israel itself) in view of the factors described above, it seems that the former predominate.

At the time of writing, no final decisions have been made concerning possible changes. But countries intending to develop a romnization system for approval by the United Nations might benefit from taking into account the above considerations.

Notes

[1] "Theoretical and practical considerations for changes in the romanization of Hebrew". United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, 18th Session, Geneva, 1996, Working Paper No. 5.

[2] "Romanization of the Hebrew alphabet". Third UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Athens, 1977. Vol. I, Report of the Conference, Resolution No. 13, pp. 29-33.

[3] UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names, Working Group on Terminology, *Glossary of Toponymic Terminology*, Version 4, ed. N. Kadmon, convenor.

[4] *Resolutions adopted at the Six UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names, 1967, 1972, 1977,1982, 1987, 1992*. Prepared for the United Nations by the Canadian Permanent Committee on Gepographical Names. See First Conference, 1967, Resolution No. 13; Second Conference, 1972, Resolution No. 8; Third Conference, 1977, Resolution No. 9 ("....to arrive at a solution").

[5] ibid., Fourth Conference, 1982, Resolution No. 15.

[6] ibid., Second Conference, 1972, Resolution No. 7.

[7] ibid., Third Conference, 1977, Resolution No. 9.

[8] ibid., Third Conference, 1977, Resolution No. 12.

[9] "Statement by the United States of America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" concerning the romanization of Chinese". Third UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Athens, 1977, Vol. II, Technical Papers, pp. 401-402.

[10] "The status of the English language". Fourth UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Geneva, 1982, Vol. II, Technical Papers, pp. 362-363.

[11] Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, Ch. XV.

[12] "Donor-recommended exonyms for topographic features in Israel". Paper submitted to the Seventh U.N. Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, New York, January 1998.

[13] N. Kadmon (1994), *Toponomasticon – Geographical Gazetteer of Israel*. Survey of Israel and "Carta", Jerusalem.